

The Practical Result of Confidence in God

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Date: 25 October 2026

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[0:00] Well, for a short time, please turn with me to Nehemiah chapter 2 and the verses from verse 9 through to the end of the chapter.

The book of Nehemiah is a wonderfully comprehensive book. What I mean by that is that it gives us so many things that we can use as grounds for studying in terms of our individual life or our congregational life.

For example, if you're going to look for a study of leadership, whether it's for a conference or for a Bible study or whatever, Nehemiah is a wonderful book because it tells us of the qualities of Nehemiah as a leader of the people during extremely challenging, difficult times.

Or if you want to have a study on how we should in a Christian way and in a way that's dedicated to God, how we should face opposition, difficult opposition, trying opposition, persecution, all of these things.

Well, the book of Nehemiah gives us much information that we can apply to that sort of situation as well. Or take, for example, the need to sometimes rebuild, whether it's in a congregational setting or denominational setting or any congregations that have declined seriously over the years.

[1:30] The book of Nehemiah gives us, again, so many principles and items of practice that we can apply to what you might say is a spiritual rebuilding process or project.

Serving God in challenging times is another theme that you can apply to Jeremiah or Jeremiah brings to us. And all of these things, there are many other topics as well that you could take from the book of Nehemiah.

But you can see from that how comprehensive it is, how useful it is in terms of our everyday Christian life, our everyday experiences as a congregation of God's people or the church in the wider sense.

And in this chapter, we find Nehemiah and his first part of attending to the task of rebuilding at Jerusalem. The rebuilding task was much more than physically rebuilding the walls or the temple that had been destroyed.

The main focus on rebuilding, as you find from the books of Nehemiah and Ezra, was rebuilding the community, rebuilding the Lord's cause, rebuilding that community of God's covenant people so that they would once again come to enjoy the blessing of God and be the type of people that God intended them to be.

[2:47] That was the central part of the rebuilding. That's why you find an emphasis on rebuilding the temple and the altar and so on, even before the walls came to be built. And that's why you find the focus being on the spiritual and the moral condition of the people that needed to be built up and that needed again to be restructured, if you like, from what it was after the disaster of them leaving and going to exile under the power of the Babylonians.

Well, you find here that there are three items in this passage, this part of the chapter, that show us how Nehemiah set about his great task as a leader, as somebody who was an encourager, as somebody who was an organizer.

All of these things built into this one man and his God-given ability. First of all, he carried out an inspection. That was the first thing, he carried out an inspection.

Verses 11 to 16 tells us how he went to Jerusalem and carried out an inspection of the city, of the walls, and of what he found there in Jerusalem.

And then following the inspection, he gave out an exhortation. And that's from verse 17 to 18, an exhortation to those who were going to help him to build.

[4:09] Come, let us build the wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer be or suffer a derision. He didn't just say to them, come, let us build the walls. It gave them especially two motivating factors, if

you like, that would lie behind the impetus to rebuild and to apply themselves to the task of rebuilding things at Jerusalem.

So there's the inspection. There's the exhortation. But then there comes a confrontation. Confrontation with those people who are mentioned, who were enemies, opponents of what Nehemiah had set out to do and what God had sent him to do.

And proved to be a thorn in his flesh. And you find that confrontation involving opposition and some of the strategy of the enemy.

But also how it ends, the chapter ends by Nehemiah replying to them and telling them that there is actually a higher authority than those of themselves who are given positions of influence in Jerusalem.

And that higher authority, of course, is God. But he refers to him significantly as the God of heaven. The God of heaven will make us prosper.

[5:27] So inspection and exhortation, confrontation. That's the theme really or the structure of what we're going to study this evening. Well, here's the inspection. Verse 11.

There was a very carefully set-about strategy on the part of Nehemiah.

Guided as he was undoubtedly by God. He set about the task, first of all, by just keeping to himself what God had sent him for, what his plans were for Jerusalem.

He didn't share that to begin with at all. He wanted to carry out this inspection, first of all. And as you go back to chapter 1 and verse 4, the first thing of all that he did was to pray.

Chapter 1 and verse 4. As soon as I heard, this is the report he got from those who knew the situation in Jerusalem. As soon as I heard these words, I sat down and I wept and I mourned for days.

[6:33] And I continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. That's the first thing he did. He prayed as soon as he heard the news. He committed the matter to prayer even after reaching Jerusalem as well.

And then he began this survey or this examination, this inspection of what he was about to do and what he was about to lead.

So as he came there, he prayed. As he had prayed indeed, even in the presence of the king before he left to go to Jerusalem.

We can see in the previous verses that he said that it says that I prayed to the God of heaven. It's just a brief reference to that.

I prayed to the God of heaven. And then he carried on his conversation with the king. So you see, Nehemiah put prayer above everything else.

[7:32] He was a careful strategist. He didn't put strategy aside. He didn't put aside the need to plan. He didn't put aside the need to examine things practically before he took action. But before he did any of that, he actually prayed to God.

And that's what he's doing here as well. He came with confession, with supplication. And he confessed to the Lord all that had been true of their previous failure, of their sin against God.

And that's the pattern that the Bible always sets for ourselves. Yes, it's fine to plan. Of course we need to plan. You need to plan as a congregation. You're planning as a congregation. It's something that goes on all the time, not just in times of vacancy.

It's something that goes on in the life of every congregation that wants to be true to the gospel and true to God. There's a strategy. There's a planning. There's an examination. You have to look at things as they are.

You have to see how to assess the matter. All of that. But before all of that, you don't actually start with a plan. You start with prayer. And we always need to remind ourselves of that, folks.

[8:38] Myself, as much as anyone else, and those of us who preach the gospel, it's very easy in times when life is so busy and so many other things to attend to, that we spend all too little time in prayer.

And that's what the devil wants you to do. He wants you to begin with a strategy. He wants you to apply your own mind to the strategy. And, of course, you have to apply your mind to the strategy, to the plan, to what you're going to do.

But you begin with prayer. You ask the Lord to guide you in your planning. You ask the Lord to guide you in what you're going to set your mind to by way of, whether it's rebuilding or whatever task it is.

That was Nehemiah's starting point. That must be our starting point. And after he had prayed, he carried out this inspection, this inspection of the situation at Jerusalem.

And that, too, is important. And that's why, as a congregation, that's what you're doing at the moment in a time of vacancy. You're carrying out an inspection of how things are.

[9:42] You're seeking that the Lord will guide you into the future, that he will guide you as to the provision of a settled ministry over you, meantime blessing the ministry you've got.

All of that is part of the ongoing assessment that you're making. And you have applied and you've rightly set up groups that will actually help towards the fulfillment of that plan.

You've got the deacon's court. You've got the Kirk session. You've got the vacancy committee meeting shortly. All of that is part of the structure that God has given you and you have set up in order to actually set out how you hope the future will work through.

But you begin with prayer. And all your prayer meetings are so important, whether they're meetings in the weekly prayer meetings or the Saturday prayer meetings, whatever meetings you have for prayer, these are there as the first and starting point for any congregational planning or strategy, whatever else we need to do on a practical level.

Prayer first, planning second. That's how it always is. That's how it is, as you read here from the book of Nehemiah. The inspection is carried out, but first of all is preceded by the prayers that he made to God, the confession that he made to God.

[11:01] Go back to the first chapter and you'll see all of that as he continued fasting and praying before the God of heaven. And as he came, as we said, before the king as well, you find there that he prayed to the God of heaven.

What are you requesting? The king asked him. And then the next thing you read is, so I pray to the God of heaven. I don't think the king heard that prayer. It wasn't necessarily a prayer that was spoken out, but this is immediately what Nehemiah did.

When the question came from the king, what are you asking for? What are you requesting? I immediately prayed to the God of heaven. In his soul, he uttered this probably quick prayer, just instant prayer for God's help.

And all of that is so significant for our own lives and for the pattern of our congregational life as well. Inspection preceded by prayer. And then you have this exhortation.

When he came to verse 17, The exhortation.

[12:33] As I said previously, involves two important motivating factors, we can call them. Points that Nehemiah put before them that were designed to motivate them, to drive them onwards in the task that lay before them.

And the first one was the removal of derision. You may not think that's very important, but it's not an accident that is actually mentioned. Come, let us build a wall of Jerusalem that we may no longer suffer derision.

What he's saying is, look, Jerusalem is a joke. They're making fun of Jerusalem amongst our enemies. And that was something the Lord himself had prophesied through the likes of Jeremiah. If you go to chapter 29 in Jeremiah, you'll find the same in his Lamentations. After the destruction had taken place, Lamentations 5. They mention that Jerusalem is at derision.

What does that mean? They're being mocked. They're being mocked by their enemies. They're a derision in the face of pagans. And others as well. That's what Nehemiah is focusing on as he brings this matter before those who are going to help him build.

[13:49] We are a derision. Derision. Well, of course, you're always going to meet with an element of derision as a Christian or as a Christian congregation or in your work for the Lord.

There always will be, to some extent or other, a measure of derision. But derision is deserved when the church has become worldly. Derision is deserved when things have fallen so far back that you can hardly distinguish the church from the world.

I'm not saying that about you, of course. But it is true of the church in the wider sense, in the age that we belong to. And you'll find people throughout the country raising their voices, sometimes to no avail or sometimes to added derision.

And added derision sometimes, sadly, from people who are confessing Christians. Who don't see that the Bible actually does not speak in favor of certain lifestyles and behaviors being added to a Christian profession.

Or to a Christian congregation, to a Christian denomination or church. And when the church becomes worldly, then the derision is deserved to a great extent.

[15 : 04] And we're very much in a similar situation today, aren't we? Because you'll find sometimes that people of the world who make no pretense of being Christians, no pretense of being other than opposed to the gospel, you'll find that they will rightly find fault when the church's proclamations are mostly political or at odds with the teaching of the scriptures.

That's a derision that's deserved. That's a mocking that's deserved. What do we do about that? How do we react to that? Well, the same as Nehemiah.

Again, you go back to the first chapter and you'll find that he focuses especially, as we said in verse 4, And then he made his confession, as we said, of the sins of the people of Israel.

We have sinned against you. And he didn't leave himself out of it. We have sinned against you.

Even I and my father's house have sinned. We have acted very corruptly against you and have not kept the commandments, the statutes, and the rules that you commanded your servant Moses.

When did I last weep over the condition of the church in our nation? I have to answer that question myself. When did you last weep?

[16 : 32] When did you find yourself grieved at heart? Not just a passing acknowledgement of the way things are in our nation morally and spiritually, and indeed in parts of our nation where the church has fallen back to worldliness in its proclamation, in its life, and in its lifestyles.

When did I last weep over that? When did I spend time on my knees, as Nehemiah did here, thinking about how desperate that situation is, and how it needs to be changed, and how only the Lord can change it?

This is what Nehemiah did. He prayed, but as he prayed, he prayed for the removal of that derision. We are in derision, he says. We're a mocking, we're a joke. And he appealed to God for that to be changed.

And it should not just grieve us, friends, but it should also stimulate us, shouldn't it? When we find that the Lord's cause is a derision in our land.

It should put us to shame. It should make us more determined to be true to God in every possible way we can, at every possible occasion we can.

[17 : 44] that our public witness will include our particular commitment to the Lord and to his cause and to the values of his gospel. And that's why this was a motivating factor for Nehemiah to put to the people, the removal of this derision.

Now you see the trouble we are in. How Jerusalem is devastated. That we may no longer suffer derision.

Let us build for the Lord. That's what he put before them. And the second thing was that the hand of the Lord was upon him.

And that too is such an important factor in motivating the people to build and to restructure things in Jerusalem.

The hand of the Lord was upon him. It's a phrase that you find more than once in Nehemiah, frequently in Nehemiah. And what he says here, the hand of the Lord was upon me and the king as well.

[18 : 51] The king had spoken to me certain words for his encouragement. But he put them in that order. Because what's more important to him than Artaxerxes and the king and his backing and his support was the hand of the Lord was upon him.

And these are wonderful words. They may be nowadays seen by people as very old-fashioned words. The hand of the Lord was upon him. But that's what happens when God blesses you. When God blesses you, what he's doing is in a spiritual way putting his hand upon you.

And when God blesses this congregation, as he has blessed them in the past, as we pray he blesses them in the present and in the future, what is actually happening can be described as God spiritually putting his hand upon you.

That's what we pray for. That's what we seek. That God's good hand and hand will be upon you for good. And you take that as God's promises in the Bible, along with the need to remove the derision that's against the church in our day.

And you feed that into your own prayer life. You feed that into your prayer meetings. You feed that into your outlook, your way of, your mindset in approaching the need of the present time.

[20:08] The removal of derision. You come to the Lord and you ask, Lord, as you say, as Nehemiah teaches us, Lord, we have sinned.

You see, we can say tonight, we've not been part of any departure into any specific heresies away from the truth of God. Other denominations may, other people, other groups may.

But not that we're saying of ourselves, we're better than other people, essentially. That's not why I'm saying it. But what I'm saying is, even if it's true as it is that we haven't actually abandoned the truth of God and just entered into different types of heresy or false teaching, still, we, as Nehemiah did, place ourselves with the people of our agency, Lord, we have sinned.

We don't extricate ourselves from the confession that we're making of sin and of the need of God's forgiveness. You find the same in Daniel in chapter 9.

Daniel was a holy man, man of God. Yet when he came to pray to God in regard to the sin of the people he belonged to, he didn't say, Lord, they have sinned.

[21:20] Lord, I'm separate from this. I'm confessing sin, but I'm confessing their sin. No, he said, Lord, we have sinned. We have done this. We've done this as a people.

And we need to maintain that outlook that the Bible brings before us to incorporate ourselves and to maintain that we are part. Even if we haven't actually ourselves engaged in any type of sin like that, still we belong to the cause of God.

We belong to his church on earth. And so we bring our petitions before him and say, Lord, we have done this. Please restore us.

Build up your cause again. Bring us back to yourself. Give us leaders that will value the gospel.

Give us people who will lead us in the things of God.

Who will be holy leaders. Who will not be ashamed of the gospel. Who will put aside ideologies that are at odds with the gospel. And that's how Nehemiah faced the situation.

[22:30] And the response, of course, was wonderful. In verse 18 you find the response of the people. I told them the hand of my God had been upon me for good, and also the words that the king had spoken to me.

And this was their response. After he had said to them about the derision in which Jerusalem was held, and of the way in which here the hand of God was upon him, and the king had given support, then they said to me, Let us rise up and build.

Let us rise up and build. And these words should have an echo tonight in my own mind, and in your own mind as well.

Let us rise up and build. Let us commit ourselves all the more day by day to the cause of God, to the building up of the cause of the gospel, wherever we're placed.

This is why God has placed us in the world. Let us rise up and build. Now let's not be discouraged by anything that's going on around us. Let's not be discouraged by having to wait this time before we come to have a new settled ministry over you, which we're praying for.

[23:41] Meantime, let's rise up and build. Let's continue to serve the Lord in his gospel where we're set. Inspection.

Exhortation. Thirdly, confrontation. You find it in verse 10 and then verses 18 to 20. In confrontation from these individuals that are mentioned there.

And the opposition that they set out, it's significant to note their names for one thing. Sanballat, Tobiah, and Geshem, who is an Arab. Sanballat, the Horonite, it's a Babylonian name associated with what is at odds with, or at enmity with, the cause of God during Nehemiah's day and other times.

Tobiah. Tobiah is a Hebrew word, and Tobiah actually means, the Lord is good. Isn't that amazing? Here's somebody who is completely in with those who are enemies of the Lord and enemies of his cause, yet he's carrying this name, the Lord is good, Tobiah. And sometimes you find that conundrum, don't you?

[24:51] People who really ought to be very different to what they are, whether it's by their name or by their confession or whatever else they are. But this man is an enemy of God. Names really, at the end of the day, mean nothing.

It's the person and the behavior of the person that means everything. So here's Sanballat, the Horonite, a Babylonian name. Here's Tobiah carrying a Hebrew name, meaning the Lord is good. He's an enemy of God. And here's Geshem, the Arab. In other words, he's not a Jew, so he doesn't really have an affiliation with the Jewish people that Nehemiah belongs to.

And the three of them form an anti-God coalition. That's what Nehemiah is facing. If it was bad enough, it was just one person in charge of the opposition.

But the three of them have coalesced. They have got a coalition here of enmity against Nehemiah and opposition to the gospel and opposition to God and to his truth.

[25 : 50] And what they say, of course, to him is significant as well. And their strategy becomes obvious as you read down through to the end of the chapter. They all have official authority.

They're not just individuals acting without authority. They're political officials in that area. And therefore, they carry that authority and they make it known to Nehemiah this is actually what he is now challenging.

And our faithfulness to God, of course, will always carry something which will be opposed to that extent by the people that are in opposition to the gospel.

And what they're really saying is, how dare this Nehemiah try and encourage people in our district, in our particular area of authority?

How dare he come and bring this message and bring this kind of plan before us who are in charge of things here?

[26 : 56] And he goes on to, even more so, there's a threat, of course, to the empire. Have you come? He says, what's this thing you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?

Doesn't that sound up to date? Are you rebelling, they say, against the king? What they're really saying is, are you here to carry out seditious purposes and plans and actions against the king, the person who rules the whole empire?

Is that why you're here? Is that your plan? You've heard it before, haven't you? Go forward to the book of Acts and the apostles faced the same thing when they went out with the gospel.

For example, chapter 17 of Acts, verses 5 to verse 9 there, you find in Athens, a mob was stirred up to oppose Paul and those who are helping him with the gospel.

Some of them are persuaded when he preached there, but a great many, and the Jews, he says, were jealous, taking hold of some wicked men, of the rabble. They formed a mob.

[28 : 03] They set the city in an uproar. They attacked the house of Jason, seeking to bring them out to the crowd. When they couldn't find them, they dragged Jason and some of the brothers before the city authorities, shouting, these men who have turned the world upside down have come here also.

And Jason has received them, and they are all acting against the decrees of Caesar, saying that there is another king, Jesus. And you find the same thing in chapter 19, if you go forward to read that for yourselves later.

But this is what Paul faced. He faced this threat from the opposition to the gospel and to what he was trying to do, just as Nehemiah did all of these years before then.

And what's said before Nehemiah, as was before Paul, how dare you come and challenge the authority, the political authority, the authority that we carry as governors in this land?

Or then in Paul's day, here is something. Are you challenging Caesar, the emperor, saying that there's another king, King Jesus? Well, the gospel always does that.

[29 : 20] And don't be surprised if people come forward and say, why are you doing this against lawful authority? Your lawful authority is your king, the Lord. And that's, I'm not suggesting we go out into the world tactlessly, and just with a kind of human, unbelieving bravado, take on the authorities, as sadly some people are in this very occasion itself these days, taking on lawful authority in the governments, whether it's in France or in this country itself.

And let me say in passing, it looks to me that that itself is fueled by an opposition to truth, an opposition to the gospel, an opposition to God.

I'm not saying it's all to do with the Islamic religion. There may be an element of that in it, but this seems to me to be a power and ideology that's simply anarchic, that wants to challenge authority, whatever authority it is.

And that will always be something the gospel faces. Are you chasing, are you choosing to actually, they're saying, are you choosing to confront and to challenge this authority, the authority of the king?

What am I to face? That great challenge in his day. Paul had to face it in his day. We have to face it in our day. Because the idea of the world, of course, is that it's the world's opinion that matters.

[30:54] It's secular opinion that matters. It's unbelieving opinion that matters. It's the majority opinion that matters. That's what you'll be told.

Are you challenging the opinion of many people, of the majority of the population, who don't want the gospel? Are you challenging that? Yes, of course we're challenging that. That's what the gospel does.

That's why God has given us the task of building his cause, of being part of God's own building work. And they finished by a reply to them.

And they said, Are you rebelling against the king? Well, the way he replied is significant, isn't it? He didn't just out and out say, Yes, we are.

What he said was, the God of heaven will make us prosper. And we his servants will arise and build.

[31:52] But you have no portion or right or claim in Jerusalem. Unbelieving, secularist, atheistic, whatever kind of ideology it is, it has no place in the work of the gospel.

It has no place in the ideology of the church. It's true to the gospel. You have no right or portion or claim. It looks like they were actually trying to influence Nehemiah so that he would take them on board and they would be part of this process and they would just manage to infiltrate his plans and then just try and sideline him or try and take over.

It looks like that was what was in their mind, their strategy. Nehemiah saw through it. Now he says, This is not your work. This is not for you. We are the servants of the God of heaven and he will make us prosper.

Now, friends, take these things with you tonight. Take them into your own situation. Individually, your family life, the congregation's life. and continue to be confident that as you serve the God of heaven, he will make you to prosper.

And whoever it is you meet that tries to thwart that, that tries to divert you from that, this must still be your outlook and your approach.

[33:28] and your confidence in God. That's really, if you like, you could give a title to or study this evening. One possible title would be The Practical Result of Confidence in God.

Because when your confidence is in God, this is the God you have confidence in. The God of heaven. the God who is above the Caesars and the Nebuchadnezzars and the Artaxerxes of this world.

And he will cause us to prosper. May it please him to do so. Let's pray. We thank you, Lord, for the many promises that are attached to the gospel and to our service of you in the gospel.

We do confess, Lord, that we find ourselves coming so far short on so many occasions of being what we should be in our lives personally and in our service for you.

But we thank you that you are the God who is the great forgiver of our sin and of our lapses. We give thanks that you are able to restore, that you are able to build up your cause.

[34:42] Lord, we pray that you would use us. Use us in this day and generation. Use us against the darkness the atheism, the secularism of our age. And help us to do so, Lord, peacefully.

Enable us to do so tactfully. Enable us to do so in a spirit that will truly be of the Lord himself. A spirit of calmness and of peace and of tact.

And grant your blessing, we pray, to the gospel meantime. And throughout our land, when there's so much unrest, throughout the whole of Europe at this time, which seems to be at boiling point, Lord, we pray for your people in that situation.

We pray for these places, these nations of the world, that you would grant to them not only peace, but the extending of your kingdom and its authority and the authority of Christ himself, that there may be many who will come even through these troubled times to bend the knee in submission to you.

Receive our thanks, we pray in his name and for his sake. Amen. Our final psalm tonight is Psalm 102. Psalm 102, which we find associated with the rebuilding of Jerusalem, of Zion.

[36:00] Psalm 102, the second version on page 368, verses 14 to 19. Well, it's 14 to 20.

Thy saints take pleasure in her stones. Well, we're saying from verse 13, I think, Thou shalt arise and mercy yet, Thou to Mount Zion shall extend, her time for favor which was set.

Behold, is now come to an end. Thy saints take pleasure in her stones, her very dust to them is dear. All heathen lands and kingly thrones on earth thy glorious name shall fear.

